

GENERAL SERIES : G. 24

# THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE ON THE EVE OF THE CRUSADES

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Published for

The Historical Association

by

George Philip & Son, Ltd.

30-32, Fleet Street, E.C.4

1953

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1953

*This essay is a slightly longer version of a lecture given before the West London Branch of the Historical Association on the 26th of September, 1952. It was intended as an introduction to the history of the Near East in the period immediately preceding the Crusades, which were the subject of some later lectures in the same series. I should like to thank Mr. P. D. Whitting for most valuable advice and encouragement.*

*Printed in Great Britain by  
WYMAN AND SONS LTD.  
London, Reading and Fakenham*

## The Byzantine Empire on the eve of the Crusades

It is not strange that there should in recent years have been a notable revival of interest in the Crusades. The origins of the Crusading movement in the west during the latter part of the eleventh century have long been studied, and traced to the operation of social and spiritual factors adroitly manipulated by statesmen of the western church. But it is an inadequate survey which would regard the contest, even in origin, as a simple duel between the Catholic west and the Moslem east. A fact of prime importance, a fact without which no western Crusade would have been possible at all, was that in the middle years of the eleventh century had occurred a complete and final breakdown of the balance of power in the Near East. This equilibrium had endured ever since the Byzantine state, properly so denominated, had been established by the house of Heraclius (610-711). The Byzantine empire, so long as it preserved intact its homeland stretching from the upper waters of the Euphrates to the Aegean Sea, stood like a strong pivot dividing the eastern and western scales of the balance, and made impossible any substantial encroachment except its own. During the two centuries between the death of Mahomet (632) and the death of the caliph Motassim (842), that empire had barely held its own against the Saracen and the Bulgar. During the two centuries between the elevation of the emperor Michael III (842) and the death of the emperor Basil II (1025), its power had steadily increased. At the close of the second of these periods it appeared far less likely that western knights and Turkish emirs should soon be locked in combat over its territories than that Syria and Palestine, Sicily and Italy should again soon hear the tramp of the legions of East Rome and submit to the sceptre of another, albeit a Graeco-Armenian, Augustus. The collapse of the Middle-Byzantine empire, consequent upon the loss of Anatolia to Seljuk Turks and Turcomans (1071-1075), immediately opened the path to the first Crusaders (1095). There is, indeed, good reason to think that their enterprise took shape in the mind, not of Pope Urban, but of the Byzantine emperor Alexius I (1081-1118). But, a bare seventy years before this date, such an enterprise would have been regarded, both in the west and in the east, not merely as impracticable but as altogether chimerical.

It seemed, indeed, at the beginning of the eleventh century,



that Byzantium herself was to expel the Infidel from the Holy City, and to restore to Christendom the Sepulchre of its Founder. Both her present power and her past history seemed to mark her out for this proud destiny. Byzantium had been the traditional foe of Islam, and had been the chief sufferer by its rise. In scarcely more than sixty years (632-698) the prosperous provinces of Syria and Palestine, Egypt and Africa, had been torn from the Roman grasp by the immediate successors of the Prophet. Sicily was conquered in the ninth century; and for long it was doubtful whether all southern Italy might not follow it. Saracen incursions from the east into the heart of the Empire, or 'Romania,' as it was called, were repeated and devastating. Year after year, during three whole centuries, the Jihad, or truceless war against the Infidel, was waged with unrelenting persistence and pitiless cruelty. The Byzantine of the middle tenth century had never known and scarcely even heard of a time when the eastern frontier was at peace. The caliphate might be rent by internal dissensions and civil war. But always the summer invasion was prepared at Melitene or Tarsus or Laodicea, and always, or almost always, it returned laden with slaves and cattle, and leaving behind it the sickening trail of burning villages and slaughtered peasants. At length, in the middle of the tenth century, it seemed that the dark cloud which had lain so long over the east was about to disperse. The Abbassid caliphate, which had passed the noon of its glory with the reign of Harun al-Raschid (786-809), was tottering to its fall, beneath the repeated blows of Turkish revolt and Egyptian invasion. And precisely at this time Byzantium was, during sixty years (963-1025), governed successively by three emperors whose military genius would have done honour to any age or country. The whole organization of the Empire, which had been placed on a military basis by the successors of Heraclius, and had perforce remained so ever since, experienced a revival which showed how strong at its heart was Byzantine military power, when it was not despised and neglected by the central government.

Nicephorus II (963-969) broke through the eastern barrier and after three hundred and thirty years the standard of the Cross floated once more over Tarsus and Antioch. His successor John I (969-976) carried on his work. His legions, pushing southwards against the Egyptian forces, entered the holy acres where had walked those feet that had once been nailed, for their advantage, on a cross. In a brilliant campaign (975) John seized Tiberias, marched triumphantly through Nazareth, Acre and Caesarea, ascended Mount Tabor, and received, though at a distance, the homage of Jerusalem herself. He would no doubt have taken possession of the Holy City, had not opposition showed itself in



his rear and compelled him to fall back in order to reduce the maritime cities of Phoenicia. In the following year, at the summit of his powers, he died. Both these conquerors were imbued with a strong sense of their crusading mission, and held language which might have served as texts for the Crusaders of the next century. The work of Godfrey and Raymond might therefore seem to have been accomplished one hundred and twenty years before Urban raised their standard in the west.

John was not the last of that line of conquerors. The third and greatest, Basil II, was still to come. The long and glorious career of Basil (976-1025) was indeed not directed towards consolidating Byzantine power as far to the south-east as Palestine. After weary years of civil war against revolting barons (976-989), he was menaced by the resurgence of Bulgaria, which, in a struggle of more than thirty years (986-1018), he at length annihilated, after the heaviest continuous fighting that the empire had known since the seventh century. The rest of his campaigning years were directed to extending his control over the Armenian and Georgian highlands; and, if he had lived, he would have carried his arms, not against the Moslems, but against Western Europe. This was partly due to the fact that for the true Byzantine the Holy Places had much less of the romantic appeal which they exerted on the west; and partly, there is reason to think, to the general aversion which Basil felt for the eastern half of his empire, so long the nursery and domain of his implacable feudal enemies. It is remarkable that all the cruelties and excesses of the crazy Fâtimid fanatic Hakim, who razed to the ground the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (1009), could not draw one Byzantine regiment southward to its defence. But there is no doubt that the Holy Land could have been effectively occupied by Basil at any time that he had chosen to send an army thither.

In the year 1025, when Basil died at the age of 68, Byzantium was beyond comparison the strongest, the richest and the most cultured state in the western world. She was absolute mistress of a territorial empire which reached from the Crimea to Cyprus, and from Erzerum to Naples. But her influence, political, religious and cultural, extended far beyond these bounds. Russians many leagues beyond the cataracts of the Dnieper acknowledged her religious and, at least by implication, her temporal supremacy. The fierce Hungarians on the Upper Danube took at her hands a client's crown. Her political influence was paramount in Armenia. The Moslem rulers of Cordova and Kairouan, of Egypt and Bagdad, vied for her favours and trembled at her displeasure. The golden byzant of her mints purchased the slaves of Syria and Slavonia, and allured the soldiers of France and Sweden. Nor



was she less eminent in the arts of peace. The revival of classical art and classical learning, whose beginnings can be discerned in the ninth century, and which had received an immense stimulus from imperial patronage in the middle of the tenth, had continued unchecked, despite the personal discouragement of Basil II. The princely sons of savage despots thronged the Byzantine court and schools for instruction in religious and profane learning. The silks and tapestries of Byzantine looms, the masterpieces of Byzantine goldsmiths, the mosaics of Byzantine craftsmen, and the paintings and manuscripts of Byzantine artists and copyists, were eagerly acquired and carefully guarded in the palaces, treasuries and libraries of the west. To the Byzantine of the early eleventh century it might well have seemed that his imperial mistress, the Queen of Cities, was at length in very truth what she had always been in theory, the centre of the material universe and the anti-type of the New Jerusalem.

This supremacy was short-lived. The throne which had seemed to be exalted above the stars of God was in fact already on the brink of the pit. The decline which followed the death of Basil II set in with terrible and almost unexampled rapidity. Less than sixty years later (1081) the emperor Alexius Comnenus succeeded to an empire which was, as his daughter tells us, bounded by the walls of his capital. In the thirty years between 1040 and 1070 a handful of Norman knights had built up a strong power in South Italy from which all traces of Byzantine government had been extirpated; and already they were casting covetous eyes on the Balkan Peninsula. Here the peaceful settlement of Basil had been rudely upset. The Croats declared their independence. The Serbs were in arms against the empire. The vast power of the savage Pechenegs, which spread from the lower Danube over the western steppe, and which even the strongest emperors had shrunk from opposing by force, poured over the northern frontiers. But these losses, grievous though they were, were as nothing by comparison with the fatal and irredeemable losses in the Byzantine homeland of Asia Minor. The Seljuk Turks had grown in power since the early years of the century. They had extinguished the Abbassid caliphate, and were already menacing the Fatimid. By 1071 they were able, with only a part of their forces, to confront the whole embattled might of the Roman empire. To meet them, the brave but ill-starred emperor Romanus IV (1068-1071) rallied what was left of the once sturdy and well-organized armies of the eastern provinces. But even his resolute spirit was appalled by the sight of the muster. Instead of the trained divisions which Basil had had at command, only a handful of ragged, hang-dog, starving wretches obeyed his summons. Their



horses were sold or dead ; their arms makeshift ; their very bugles and standards filthy and unserviceable. The emperor did what he could, and even against that total demoralization he made some headway. But his army relied perforce on mercenaries, both western and eastern, of doubtful loyalty, and his own general staff was rotten with disaffection. In the late summer of 1071, almost at the same moment as Guiscard was entering the capital of Byzantine Italy, the final disaster took place in the east. The Turkish forces of Alp-Arslan met the Byzantine army at Manzikert, near Lake Van, and inflicted on it a bloody and irreparable defeat.

Two years later began the systematic invasion and occupation of Asia Minor. There could be little opposition. Within less than a decade nearly all of that lately prosperous and fertile region, the kernel of Byzantine strength since the seventh century, was under the heel of the Turkish emirs of Caesareia, Nicaea or Smyrna. Nor was this the extent of Byzantine losses. The treasury was empty. The navy had ceased to exist. Trade was at a standstill. The currency was ruinously debased. And only some of these misfortunes could be alleviated by an alliance with the maritime and commercial power of Venice, which had to be bought at a price which made it doubtful whether the remedy were not worse than the disease. History has few examples to show of a collapse so sudden and so complete as this, which in a bare half-century changed the whole political pattern of the Mediterranean world, and thereby recast the future of mediæval Europe.

It is natural that historians should have asked themselves the reasons for this decline, and equally natural that no very clear or unanimous replies should hitherto have been received. Such questions are in truth easier to ask than to answer. That states and empires grow in vigour, culminate in glory, and decline in old age and decrepitude, is a matter of common observation. But the fundamental causes of this process are hardly better understood than those of life itself. All we can do is to point to accidents or symptoms of the process, which go some way towards explaining how, but very little way towards explaining why. We need consider but one example. The obvious and facile answer to our conundrum is that in the eleventh century Byzantium was confronted simultaneously by the young and vigorous Norman power in the west and the young and vigorous Turkish power in the east. That is certainly a fact. But at least twice before in her long history she had been faced by similar threats. Avars and Persians had menaced her in the seventh century ; Saracens and Bulgars in the eighth to tenth centuries. She had survived both these menaces, and there was, to all appearance, no reason why she should not have survived the third. On the contrary : in 1025 her armies



were strong and intact. Her organization would have moved the envy of Heraclius and Leo the Wise. Her treasuries were full to overflowing. To Nicephorus II the Turcoman hordes of Alp-Arslan would have seemed a rabble ; to Basil II Robert Guiscard would have seemed a tedious petty rebel, doomed to prompt extinction. It is clear that our fact will not lead us to our cause.

Nevertheless, some remarks on salient aspects of the Byzantine external and internal tensions at this period may cast a clearer light on the problem, and may serve the additional purpose of illustrating the ideas which lay behind the Byzantine structure and the motives which dictated Byzantine policies. Four of these aspects strike the eye : they are, the Byzantine imperial idea, a dogma of the ancient world which could not be adapted to the changed conditions of mediæval Europe ; the clash of races within the Empire ; the social crises of the tenth and eleventh centuries ; and, finally, the onset of exhaustion.

1. The Byzantine monarchy, with its principle of one empire, universal and eternal, was, as is well known, the heir of the Roman monarchy of Augustus, to whom was given the promise of Jupiter, 'imperium sine fine dedi' (Verg Aeneid, I 279 ; cf. Luke 1, 33). But it was the genius of Constantine the Great (324-337) which, in the fourth century of our era, harnessed to Roman imperialism the powerful engine of Christianity. The Christian theology lent, or was construed as lending, the massive weight of an already universally admitted divine sanction to the idea of an earthly empire, which now became the concrete answer to the prayer "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven!" For did not God Himself prescribe the earthly rule of Rome? Had not Jesus Himself said to Pilate, "Thou couldest have no power against me except it were given thee from above"? Did not St. Peter and St. Paul enjoin submission to the powers that be? And if above there was but one empire and one eternal Emperor, that is Christ, did it not follow that on earth there could, or should, be but one empire and one emperor, after the pattern, as Plato would have said, of things laid up in the heavens? "As the earthly empire is formed in the likeness of the heavenly, so it is not only universal, but eternal; man cannot overthrow it. Jupiter had promised, but one greater than Jupiter had confirmed. What might have been a mere political aspiration had become transformed into a religious dogma." The imperial throne at Byzantium was placed beneath a hemispherical baldequin, which represented the firmament. The throne itself was not single, but double. On the week-days, the emperor sat in the right-hand seat; on Sundays he sat in the left. For on the Holy Day, the right-hand seat was



appropriated to the use of one yet more august than the Augustus, namely, the Second Person of the Trinity. So close was the tie which bound the earthly order to its unseen paradigm above.

This exclusive dogma, so grand in its conception, obviously carried with it certain corollaries which must be difficult of digestion by any but the most cohesive and subservient empires. If there was on earth, as in heaven, but one emperor, one empire and one church, it followed that everyone outside these bounds was by implication a rebel and a heretic. It was the duty of the Chosen People of the New Jerusalem to do God's will by showing these rebels the error of their ways. Foreign states, foreign tongues, foreign creeds were by definition alien to God's Kingdom on earth, and entitled to no consideration, recognition or sympathy whatever. There are no foreigners in heaven. There is no plurality of nations, constitutional change, or democratic system. No free vote of the celestial conclave can put down the Almighty from his seat. He shall reign, ever One God, for ever and ever. And it was His will that the Byzantine emperor should, so far as might be, represent Him in this imperfect world of sense.

The resolute application of this doctrine was the reason why, in the midst of their grandeur and prosperity, the Byzantines were universally hated and execrated by their neighbours. At a time when in the west the germs of national self-consciousness were sprouting from the welter which followed the collapse of the western Roman empire, the Byzantine neither understood nor cared to understand any religion, language or culture but his own. The Catholic and cultivated states of the west, which obeyed the successors of Charlemagne, were comprehended equally with the most savage tribes of the steppe and the most infidel nations of the east under the contemptuous appellation of 'gentiles,' whose ultimate fate it was to bow to the single vice-gerent of Christ and the one true Orthodox faith. At the time, indeed, when Byzantium was emerging from two centuries of political eclipse and setting herself once more on the path towards greatness—that is, in the ninth century—the imperial government seems to have been disposed here and there to adopt saner and more tolerant policies, which bore rich fruit during the following hundred years. The prudent administration of Michael III (856–867) permitted to the Bulgar and the Moravian the use of their own tongue in the liturgy; and the genius of Byzantine apostles created for them the means of so doing. Basil I (867–886) allowed considerable local autonomy to the converted, or reconverted, Slavs of Dalmatia. Leo VI (886–912) positively enjoined on his victorious generals the sympathetic treatment of conquered peoples. But these policies were never more than expedients, and were quickly discontinued as Byzantine



military power expanded. The insolent conduct of Nicephorus II (963-969) and John I (969-976) towards Bulgaria and the western emperors left a deep and lasting impression, which can be clearly traced in the pages of Liudprand. To us it appears not only foolish but barely comprehensible, unless we take into account the imperial dogma that gave rise to it. The conquest of Bulgaria by Basil II (1014-1018) was followed by a ruthless Byzantinization of that country, which deliberately aimed at eradicating every national sentiment. Byzantine governors, Byzantine bureaucrats, Byzantine bishops and clergy, all monolingually Greek, were set over the proud race of Symeon and Samuel; and loudly complained that they were condemned to be exiled in Bulgarian marshes and to listen to the harsh croaking of Bulgarian frogs. During the tenth century the oppression of the South Italian population by Byzantine governors was a by-word; and more than one governor was massacred by his exasperated subjects, who, if they had been sympathetically treated, would have been as loyal to their hereditary master as were the Greeks of Peloponnesus or Asia Minor. It was clear that they would turn at the earliest moment to any other master rather than endure such odious tyranny.

The most fearful disasters could not humble the spiritual pride of the Byzantine rulers. In 1071 the emperor Romanus IV was taken prisoner after the battle of Manzikert. He was treated with all humanity by his captor, who asked how he himself would have been treated by the Byzantines if they had won the battle. Romanus, with more truth than tact, replied that his captive would have been brutally flogged. The sultan rebuked him with grave dignity. 'I shall not,' he said, 'imitate that cruel and harsh example. Indeed I have heard that your Christ enjoins upon you peace and forgiveness of trespasses; and that He puts down the mighty, and exalts the humble and meek.'

Nor was this inveterate exclusiveness confined to politics and religion. It pervaded the cultural field also. In the tenth and eleventh centuries Byzantine learning and scholarship reached heights scarcely equalled by any other medieval state. But they were Greek heights, and Greek alone. It is sufficient to say that during that time knowledge of the Latin at Byzantium was almost confined to subordinate clerks in the foreign ministry, who knew just enough of it to translate documents from the west into Greek. The most cultivated and learned of scholars, the Emperor Constantine VII himself (913-959), who had a genuine interest not only in the present state of his empire and its neighbours but also in the past history of the Roman world, has left no indication that he could spell out the language of Augustus and Vergil, and many indications that he could not. Scarcely anything in Byzantine



history is more remarkable than the persistence of this pharisaical puritanism. Little more than half a century before the fall of Constantinople herself, when the imperial city was a petty state surrounded by powerful foes who could at any moment extinguish her tenuous spark of life, her patriarch could still write (1394) to the Great Prince of Moscow that allegiance to the Byzantine emperor was a necessary article of the Christian faith. In days of adversity and approaching doom such fidelity to dogma may make a respectable or at least a pathetic appearance. But in days of power it was odious and exasperating in the highest degree. No great empire built on such principles could survive in a world where the unity of late antiquity was giving place to the plurality of the middle ages.

Thus for the Byzantines the theoretical claim to universal domination was one of the chief obstacles to their retaining even such dominion as they had acquired. But, quite apart from external policy, the Middle-Byzantine state was plagued by two internal contradictions which were in fact but two facets of the same internal problem, and which became acute and indeed fatally menacing at precisely this conjuncture. There was the racial contradiction; and there was the contradiction of a feudal plurality within a theoretically unified administration.

2. The Byzantine empire is sometimes regarded simply as a Graecized survivor of the Roman: that is to say, as an empire Roman in organization and imperial theory, but Greek in language and culture and, to a large extent, in theological doctrine. This is true enough, so far as it goes. But it leaves important considerations out of account. The question of the racial elements which revived and populated the empire in the days of its glory, is often overlooked. By the tenth century of our era the Byzantine governing class had discarded its original west Roman element and its early Germanic affinities. The Slav element, though numerically strong, had scarcely intruded itself into the higher ranks of society; and where it had done so, was regarded with dislike and contempt by the two strong strains from which those ranks were mainly recruited, the Greek and the Armenian. The former of these was prominent in the bureaucracy and in the more conservative wing of the church. But the military might, the military organization and the military genius of Byzantium, the sure, strong base on which the whole glittering superstructure stood, was Armenian through and through. It was the fate of that vigorous and highly gifted race that its greatest historical achievement should have been won in the service of an empire and a culture not its own. Ever since the seventh century, when the first great Armenian emperor Heraclius saved the Roman and inaugurated the truly



Byzantine state, the sturdy highlanders of the eastern borders had migrated steadily westward under the increasing pressure of Islam. By the tenth century almost the whole defence of the eastern frontier was in the hands of the great territorial magnates of Armenian stock, and fresh Armenian regiments were constantly being recruited and settled along the border. But the peaceful Armenian penetration had gone much further than this. Armenians, masquerading under Hellenic or Hellenized names and titles, were already in virtual control of the whole vast machine; and well was it for that machine that they were so. From the middle of the ninth to the beginning of the eleventh century, six great leaders stand pre-eminent, in a catalogue of brave and devoted generals, as the architects of Middle-Byzantine material greatness. They are, Basil I, Romanus I, John Gourgen, Nicephorus II, John I and Basil II. It is well known that all were of Armenian descent. To claim that the empire of the tenth century, as a whole, was in essence a Christian Greater Armenia with a veneer of Hellenic culture, would certainly be misleading and rhetorical. But the impartial observer would probably admit that more might be said in support of such a proposition than would at first sight appear.

This Armenian permeation, which gave to the Byzantines their best cavalry soldiers, their steadiest and toughest fighters, and their most brilliant generals, naturally became accelerated as the Byzantine arms at last began to make headway against the Saracen power on the east. As the imperial frontiers expanded toward Armenia in the early tenth century, more and more Armenians found themselves within the orbit of Byzantium or flocked to join her exceedingly well paid service. They were employed as regular garrison-troops, not only on the eastern frontier from Erzerum to Tarsus, but at other points further west where Saracen attacks were to be feared: at Priene, for example, and about Smyrna and Ephesus. It was in these predominantly Greek areas, as well as in the capital, that they came into contact with the jealous culture of the age-old Hellenic tradition. The populace of Constantinople was strongly averse to war-lords and to their eastern troops, whom it regarded, not without some justification, as barbarous. As the Armenian element became more oppressive, this native opposition came to a head. The usurping emperor Nicephorus II, whom, for all his prestige as the captor of Crete, the Constantinopolitans had accepted at best as an unpleasant necessity, appeared to them much in the guise of a foreign conqueror supported by an invincible retinue of mercenaries. His tactless introduction of his Armenian troops into the capital precipitated a crisis. Rioting broke out, and a clash took place



between the citizenry and the Armenians, in which many lives were lost. The church, as so often before and since, led the national Hellenic resistance. It was supported also by the imperial navy, a force which the legitimate emperors had during half a century sedulously fostered in home waters as a loyal support against the eastern war-lords. The murder of Nicephorus (969) averted the danger of prolonged internal strife; and his successor John occupied his arms abroad. But feelings ran high; and the great triumphs of Nicephorus and John were, in their own day, not sufficiently appreciated in the capital of their empire. It is interesting to speculate whether a trace of this bitter internal opposition may not survive even to the present day. In medieval and modern Greek folk-lore, the devil manifests himself to men in the guise of a negro, coal-black, hideous and stenching. But in the Aegean island of Chios, which was for long an important centre of Byzantine naval defence, the devil appears to men in the guise, not of a negro, but of an Armenian!

3. This racial antagonism was, we have said, but one facet of a far more serious social evil which, during all the period of Byzantine greatness, and with increasing velocity during Byzantine decline, was undermining the whole imperial structure. The evil lay in the ever increasing military and territorial power of the mainly Armenian aristocratic families in the eastern provinces of Anatolia.

The theory of Byzantine military organisation since the seventh century had been that of free peasant proprietors, Greek-speaking and Christian, living on land presented by the crown, and giving service, active or training, when called upon to do so. By this system, it was hoped, both external and internal security would be assured: external by the furnishing of loyal, tough fighting-men, 'a bold peasantry, their country's pride'; and internal, because these small-holders depended directly upon the crown for their land, tax-exemptions and military advancement. The freehold 'soldiers' estates,' as they were called, inextricably woven among the smaller holdings of the purely agricultural peasants in the village communes, had during four centuries provided the backbone of the empire's military potential, the heavy-armed cavalryman: for the head of each family which occupied such an estate was a professional soldier. In the tenth century these estates were legally bound to be of the value of not less than four pounds gold, or two-hundred and eighty-eight gold pieces. Though subject to the basic land-tax, they were in theory exempt from all the subsidiary imposts with which the less privileged estates were cumbered. Nor was this all. The serving soldier, or head of the family, was, again in theory, entitled to regular pay and allowances from the central treasury, so as to ensure his proper equipment for



military campaigns. The peasant-soldiers therefore constituted a kind of peasant-aristocracy among their rustic neighbours. It is obvious that the first duty of a responsible and conscientious government was to preserve intact, at any cost, the independence of the provincial soldier, and his feeling of pride in his country's social hierarchy.

The legitimate emperors of the Macedonian dynasty (867-1028) were keenly alive to the importance, military, social and economic, of an independent peasantry. All the blandishments of imperial propaganda were practised to keep it loyal. All the sanctions of imperial legislation were applied to keep it free. Imperial propaganda took two forms, a social and a spiritual. On the one hand it aimed at convincing the peasants that the ruling house of Basil the Macedonian had sprung from an immediate origin not less lowly than their own. This doctrine of the 'Poverty of Basil,' which has effectively obscured the historical truth about his family and antecedents, was designed to show that the emperors, themselves of humble stock, understood and championed the 'poor' against the exploitation and rapaciousness of the 'powerful.' On the other hand, a more spiritual interpretation of the bond between crown and commons was designed for the soldiery. The soldiers of the empire are the emperor's own sons after the spirit. As the worshippers of Christ derive their significance and sustenance from the mystical communion with their Master, so the soldiers partake, mystically and spiritually, of the elements of their earthly sovereign. They are flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. His spirit, though it is but one, is divided among them, and each receives his share. It is not easy to think of a clearer manifestation of the imperial myth which made of the emperor the earthly embodiment of Christ. The only difference between communion with the one and with the Other would seem to be that communion with the emperor was consummated without even the concrete elements of bread and wine.

Both these doctrines are significant, as much for what they implicitly deny as for what they explicitly vindicate. They emphasize the natural, unshakable bond between the emperor and his people. They expose as the enemies of God and man all who seek to destroy or invalidate it. The internal foes against whom these doctrines were devised were the acquisitive land-owners. These acquirers were of three kinds, and they acquired land for different reasons. The great military families multiplied their estates in the same manner and from the same causes as did the more properly feudal barons of the west. The wealthy bureaucrats of the civil aristocracy bought land because they had no other means of investing their capital: the state's rigid control of foreign



trade discouraged commercial ventures, such as helped to create the sturdy navy and mercantile marine of Venice or Genoa. Lastly, the church became the not unwilling legatee of the many who believed that their hopes of eternal salvation might be enhanced by a prudent disposition of temporal goods. But, from whatever causes and in whatever circumstances it came about, the growth of large landed properties must be fatal to the agrarian and fiscal economy, and with it to the military organization and unified political structure, of the empire.

Of the three classes of acquirers incomparably the most dangerous was the first. The power of the military magnates of the east had been increasing since the eighth century, and by the tenth century had become very menacing indeed. The source of their power lay in the fact that in them resided the military experience and military leadership of the empire ; and no emperor who was not also a general could contemplate doing without their aid. They and they alone could form, and had from generation to generation formed, a stable defence against the Saracen beyond the eastern frontier. But this very power rendered them as formidable to their masters as to their enemies. Laws might be passed against civil and ecclesiastical proprietors, which, though certain to encounter vigorous and sustained opposition, had at least some chance of being applied by a resolute government. Against the military magnates nothing but military force could be effective. And just as this crucial moment (886-976) the reigning house was represented successively by three emperors who never took the field, and the third of whom left an infant to succeed him. The consequence was an unchecked increase in the power of the military aristocrats, two of whom were able actually to mount the throne (963-976). At this time it seemed that, even if the legitimate house survived, its crown must inevitably become the pawn of successive mayors of the palace ; and, but for a quite extraordinary turn of fortune, it would almost certainly have become so.

Against the feudal aristocracy propaganda and land-laws, such as those of Romanus I (922, 934), were alike useless. There was but one remedy which, if steadily applied, could have halted the process whereby more and more of the peasant holdings fell into the power of general or bureaucrat : and that was the remedy which no emperor could afford to apply, namely, a substantial remission of taxes combined with rigorous control of their collection. The sagacious Basil I, on mounting the throne (867), observed, "We must have money ; nothing can be done without that." The cost of imperial government was enormous. Armies must be paid. A vast horde of bureaucrats and churchmen must be maintained. Foreign states must be subsidized. Palaces and



churches must be erected. The most skilful diplomacy could not prevent a series of ruinous wars. The prudent reform of the Heraclian house, whereby the strength of the army had been transferred from highly paid corps of mercenaries to peasant freeholders, had undoubtedly brought with it a substantial monetary economy. But even the most powerful emperors had to maintain, at a heavy cost, regular regiments of Armenian, Turcoman, Negro or Scandinavian guards. All this money had to come from somewhere. High as was the level of commercial taxation and customs dues, the bulk of the annual revenue had to be wrung from the Anatolian peasantry. However 'philanthropic' in theory the emperor might be, however he might indulge in eleemosynary acts to the benefit of pious foundations or distressed citizens, he could never afford any continuous or wholesale relief from taxation; and the taxation of peasant-holdings, even when it went no further than the letter of the law, was grievous and vicious. Especially hateful was the principle known as 'common responsibility'. By this, each commune was assessed at an annual sum which the proprietors in the commune were jointly held liable for subscribing. If, therefore, a proprietor defaulted or decamped, his neighbours were compelled to make good his deficit, in return for which they received the often dubious privilege of taking over and cultivating his property. It is easy to see that this vicious principle bore most hardly on the most skilful and industrious, who might at any moment be saddled with financial responsibility for the feckless and incompetent. Even for the most industrious, life was hard enough. Subsistence was not easily come by, at the best of times. The death of a horse or a cow might cripple a family. A Saracen inroad, a visitation of locusts or a prolonged drought, might, and often did, ruin the economy of a district.

But the evil went far deeper than this. A small man, or group of small men, is easy prey for the extortionate tax-gatherer. And the central government could never or would never control the excesses of its own fiscal officials. Basil I, who, whatever his origins and early life, was fully aware of this, in his later years positively refused to send out any assessors at all, since none could be found of sufficient integrity for the mission. Taxes multiplied with ever increasing frequency and weight on the shoulders of the peasants. This oppression, cruel and short-sighted as it was, would not necessarily have been fatal to the military organization of the empire if only the small military estates had been exempt from it. But there is good evidence to show that the peasant-soldier, in theory subject only to the land-tax, was in practice as helpless as any other peasant against the demands of the publican. Soldiers as well as simple peasants were pillaged for the hundred



and one 'benefices' required for military and provincial administration ; and were equally subject to the harsh reprisals consequent on refusal or inability to pay. To the imperial publican, sent out from the capital and tainted with an already strong prejudice against everything military, the soldier was as much a peasant as his neighbours, to be oppressed as they were, and, if contumacious, to be dragged before a civil tribunal. But in his own eyes the soldier was one who lived a hero and died a martyr ; one who, if he transgressed at all, was amenable only to the jurisdiction of the court martial.

This foolish and indeed suicidal extortion naturally bred in the breasts of the provincial soldiers a fierce resentment against the central government, which repeatedly showed itself in the untrustworthy *moral* of Byzantine armies when commanded by imperial favourites. Little attention has been paid in our time to the problem of Byzantine military *moral*. But it was very carefully considered by contemporaries, who, to say the truth, had but too much reason to consider it. A series of fearful disasters to armies equipped with all that money could supply or ingenuity suggest, was attributable to no other causes than panic and indiscipline at decisive conjunctures. Nicephorus and John could conquer through the love which their soldiers bore to them personally ; Basil II, through a phenomenal discipline and power of organization. But these were exceptions. It is far from fanciful to regard *moral* in the field as closely related to economic security at home. The soldier will fight with less conviction for his emperor if that emperor's publicans are at the same time reducing him to beggary and starvation. On the other hand, the soldier was naturally ready enough to surrender his embarrassed estate and his too onerous liberty to a military magnate who could deliver his men from oppression and fear, and who, himself a soldier, understood and loved the common soldier who fought beneath his standard. A typical example of the relations between aristocratic generals and their troops is seen in the mutual affection of Nicephorus II and his heroic warriors. He vindicated for them the honours of martyrdom ; they spontaneously promised to live and die with him.

The Saracen and Bulgarian wars of the early tenth century accelerated this disastrous process. With every military estate that passed into the control of the larger land-owner, a free, independent soldier was lost to the crown and an annual sum lost to the treasury. From every point of view, whether military, social, or economic, the internal system of the empire was by the middle of the tenth century gravely threatened. Nor was it easy to see by what men or methods the decline could be checked.



In the long run it was not checked. But for a moment it seemed that the clock might be put back and the old, unified system of control re-established indeed. By some odd freak of nature, the Macedonian house, whose last three rulers had been a philosopher, an antiquary and a voluptuary, produced a legitimate emperor who was also a first-class administrator and a first-class military genius. Basil II (976-1025), known to history by the fearful appellation of 'Slayer of the Bulgars', was as alien to the traditions of Byzantine sovereignty as was his long rule to the traditions of Byzantine government. Squat and solid of form, round-headed and blue-eyed, sparsely bearded and profusely whiskered, tireless in action and iron in purpose, of phenomenal exactitude and terrific severity, he was the very type of a Norman rather than of a Byzantine despot. All his tastes, all his prejudices were utterly opposed to those of the Byzantine culture. Extravagant ceremonies, gorgeous apparel and luxurious appointments were odious to his spartan and parsimonious temper. He detested and despised scholars and learning. If for reasons of policy he persecuted the military nobility, the bureaucratic nobility was no more to his taste; and he governed through a handful of mediocre subordinates under his own immediate supervision. The female sex, which, in the persons of Irene, Theodora, Zoë, Helen and his own mother Theophano, had during two centuries played a prominent rôle in the imperial government, he mistrusted to that degree that he would never even marry. His whole reign was devoted, with undeviating purpose and unflagging energy, to the advancement of his empire abroad and the unification of his empire at home. He was the epitome of 'l'état c'est moi.'

When Basil entered into his inheritance, at the age of nearly twenty, his chief task was the suppression of the military aristocrats. He had learned their power; and never was a lesson more cruelly and persistently inculcated. From his fifth to his nineteenth year the empire had been governed by two usurpers from this class. From his nineteenth to his thirty-second year, his power was challenged by one revolt after another of the same aristocracy. At one time he seemed certain to lose his throne; and only preserved it by calling in the aid of a barbarian power which had to be secured by concessions humiliating and galling to the grandson of Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Through all these years of internal disorder (976-989) his firmness and resolution persisted and at last made head against the detested clans. Bardas Phocas was slain. Bardas Skleros, old and disillusioned, yielded at discretion. In the final decade of the tenth century the legitimate cause had triumphed.

Supreme at last, Basil meditated a signal revenge on the whole



class that had so long disputed his authority. Their strength had hitherto lain in the fact that they formed an indispensable element of imperial defence. A hundred years had passed since Basil I had been repulsed from the gates of Adata and Marash. During all that time no Byzantine emperor had led his troops in the field ; and the government had, as Leo VI had frankly admitted, perforce to choose its commanders from the military aristocracy. Basil II was under no such necessity. He campaigned in person, and was his own field-marshal. His temper, in boyhood easy and pleasure-loving, had become ulcerated during years of ill-usage and misfortune. His enemies now lay at his feet. It was at once duty and pleasure to chastise them.

The prime object of Basil's internal policy was to break, once for all, the territorial and financial power of the military barons. Other land-owners, both lay and ecclesiastical, also suffered by his measures ; but they were not the target at which those measures were chiefly aimed. The land-laws of his great-grandfather were sharpened anew, and, for the first and last time, vigorously applied. It was enacted (996) that all lands for which a title reaching back a clear seventy years could not be shown, were to be surrendered, without compensation, to the original owners. But as between the land-owner and the crown, no time-limit was to be valid : the land-owner was required, with grim humour, to cite a title which should reach back one thousand years to the reign of Caesar Augustus. The enactment meant, in effect, that the crown could legally proceed to wholesale confiscation ; and this extreme sanction was, in at least one memorable instance, actually enforced. But, in general, extortion was found to be economically more advantageous than expropriation. The heavy burden of ' common responsibility ' for making up the taxes levied on a commune was now laid exclusively on the rich landlord who held any property in the area. Protest and resistance were alike unavailing. During thirty years the large landed proprietor, stripped of all that his family had acquired in two generations, was systematically pillaged to support the economy of his small neighbours. Many were distressed ; and many, especially of the ecclesiastical properties, were reduced to absolute beggary. But it is striking testimony to the firmness with which the landed aristocracy was entrenched, that even the most radical measures could not finally destroy it. Some idea of the financial power of the secular and ecclesiastical properties can be gained from the fact that Basil, who spent half a century in continual and costly campaigning, and who was by no means severe in fiscal exactions from the peasantry, yet left at his death a treasury fuller than it had been at any time since the death of Theophilus.



Basil achieved much. He left at his death an empire stronger than it had been for centuries past. But the whole structure that he had built depended for its preservation on him, and on him alone. He was one who fought single-handed against the spirit of his age. That the main channels of historical development are determined by economic and social factors far more complex and fundamental than the exploits or disasters of mere individuals, who can, in the long run, do little to mould or modify them, is a proposition which few in these days would care to deny. It remains true even of states or empires which appear on the surface to be governed by the will or whim of a single autocrat. Occasionally a powerful and determined ruler may set the mark of his personality on an epoch, either by accelerating and thus seeming to direct its predestined course, or else by momentarily damming or diverting its stream. Basil II was one of the latter class. His long reign, his eminent talents, his inflexible purpose and his merciless severity enabled him to re-create an imperial system which was anachronistic and so of necessity ephemeral. When we seek to explain the apparently inexplicable rapidity with which his empire dissolved, we are bound to regard his achievement, both at home and abroad, not as a promising advance which but for the folly and weakness of his successors might have been continued, but rather as a dam laid across a stream, which, having broken it down, proceeded with double velocity along its natural channel. In truth by the eleventh century the doctrine of world sovereignty beneath the elect of Christ was as antiquated as its internal counterpart, that every department of state, administrative, military or commercial, depended directly from the throne. The unity of the ancient world was dead; and the day of pluralities, of states and cultures, of petty despots and feudal magnates, had long since dawned.

When Basil was dead, there could no longer be any question of a unified state, or of an economy based on peasant properties, whether military or merely agricultural. The feudal estates expanded with a rapidity proportionate to their enforced contraction during the past half-century. The power of the crown now became the property, not of the legitimate house, which was virtually extinct, but of whichever of the two great feudal factions, the military or the bureaucratic, could by intrigue or force possess it. These two factions were at deadly enmity with one another; and the prolongation of Byzantine influence in a world in which the aspect of foreign affairs grew daily more menacing, virtually depended on whether the administration fell to the faction which fostered the military arm or to the faction which hated and neglected it. The history of the next half-century (1025-1068) is the history of



this disastrous struggle for the crown, in which the ruin of the state was accelerated even beyond its natural pace by the victory of the bureaucratic faction. For the increase of the landed estates it would certainly be unjust to blame the policies of the bureaucratic emperors : in this policy they and their opponents were at one, and were directed by deep-seated economic trends over which they had no control. But the civilian emperors may fairly be called in question for their wilful blindness to the military needs of their empire, a blindness for which even their own supporters in the capital, albeit wise after the event, saw fit to condemn them.

Basil's brother, Constantine VIII (1025-1028), an aged voluptuary, reigned during three years ; and even in that short period Basil's radical legislation against the large landed estates became a dead letter, and was already in a fair way to being formally repealed. A bitter struggle for the succession was waged by the military and civilian factions over the deathbed of the last in the male line of Basil the Macedonian. Constantine himself, foolish and weak as he was, had sense enough to see that his empire needed a military ruler ; and he offered the hand of his daughter, and with it the crown, to Constantine Dalassenos. But the civil faction was powerful and at hand. At the last possible moment the dying man was induced to rescind his decision. The offer to Dalassenos was countermanded. And on the 15th of November, 1028, the imperial diadem was placed on the head of Romanus Argyropoulos, the chief magistrate of Constantinople.

This victory of the bureaucratic party is a significant moment in Byzantine history. The election of Romanus III was prophetic of the decline of military might during the next fifty years. During that period nine emperors reigned, of whom only two, Isaac and Romanus IV, whose combined autocracies numbered five short years (1057-1059, 1068-1071), had any understanding of the military organization of their empire. Three of the others, not content with neglecting, took active steps to dissolve and destroy it. Constantine IX (1043-1055), a spendthrift and dissolute sovereign, the delight of whose earlier years was his mistresses, and who, when crippled by the gout, derived exquisite pleasure from seeing his courtiers immerse themselves unawares in deep water, raised money by shamelessly encouraging the sale of military exemptions to the peasant-soldiers of the province of Iberia. Michael VI (1056-1057), a professional bureaucrat, went out of his way to insult and revile the military chiefs, thereby provoking both desertion and rebellion. Constantine X (1059-1067) completed the work of destruction. A keen amateur lawyer, he devoted all his time to his favourite pursuit. While the advancing Turks captured province after province on his eastern border,



while Guiscard overran Apulia and the Magyars stood at the gates of Belgrade, while the whole Balkan Peninsula was threatened with inundation by half a million of the Uz, Constantine would spend not a farthing on his armies, encouraged his soldiers to abandon the field for the forum, and believed that his empire's best defence lay in the spiritual weapons of fasting and prayer. This could not last. In the year of Constantine's death (1067) the Turks at length burst into the heart of Romania, and sacked the Cappadocian Caesareia. The Roman armies, lacking arms, equipment, pay and provisions, were starving and mutinous. The crisis could no longer be ignored or denied. A strong military leader was absolutely essential. At last, in the teeth of violent civilian opposition, Romanus IV Diogenes ascended the throne (1st of January, 1068).

4. The demoralization and treachery which Romanus had to encounter, his brave attempt at recovery, and the inevitable failure of that attempt, have already been described. We have tried to show how political, military and economic factors all contributed towards the disaster. But in our catalogue of symptoms we must not omit all mention of a social factor whose operation is as certain as it is hard to define: the onset of exhaustion. This symptom can claim, however, no more than a simple mention here, partly because a far abler pen has stressed its importance at length, partly because the absence of concrete facts and figures makes it impossible to trace its effects in detail. During the best part of its existence the Byzantine empire had been almost continuously at war. The most brilliant victories, the most subtle diplomacy, the most prudent administration, the most catholic recruitment of foreign elements, could not stay or repair the endless drain on manpower and resources, which went on from year to year, from century to century. The encroachments of church and aristocracy were aggravating symptoms of what was in fact a profound constitutional disease. In this long process of wasting, Bulgaria, though once repelled and once annihilated, must claim the pre-eminent rôle. The bloodiest and most disastrous war ever fought by Byzantium was the eleven-years war (913-924) against Symeon. The next most disastrous was the thirty-years war against Samuel. Byzantine losses are incalculable; but it cannot be but that much of the native military element and much of the social organization were irreparably destroyed. The final triumph of Basil II must therefore be viewed as a last superhuman effort, a gigantic *tour de force*, which strained the resources of his empire beyond all bearing, and condemned it to sudden and speedy destruction.

It is certain that to contemporaries the fall of the Middle-



Byzantine empire was both unexpected and inexplicable. Psellus, the shrewdest political observer of that time, was frankly at a loss to explain the military decline and fall. After the battle of Manzikert, the sultan was astonished and even appalled by the completeness of his success, which he had never expected and knew not how to exploit. This general bewilderment is not strange: for many then living had seen, and fought in, the invincible armies of Basil II. Nor could men see that the empire was eaten away by its internal diseases, and that only the outer husk of its recent strength and splendour remained. At a touch it had collapsed and crumbled into dust.

It has rightly been claimed that from the battle of Manzikert the empire 'never recovered.' Adroit diplomacy combined with exceptional military talents enabled the first three emperors of the Comnenian house (1081-1180) to effect a partial recovery; a recovery which certainly entitles us to speculate on what might have been the empire's destiny if a military family, such as the Comneni, could have established a dynasty in 1028. But the traditional source of supply, both of men and materials, was lost and could never be regained. Without it Byzantium could never long endure as a great power. The Comnenian and later the Palaeologan (1261-1282) revivals were the progressively diminishing echoes of the tenth century's peal of triumph. Each effort was followed by increased languor and exhaustion. When the final catastrophe took place (1453) Byzantium had long ceased to exert any political influence. She had but two bequests to make in her last testament: the treasures of Ancient Greece she left to western, and her own tradition of despotic, universal, exclusive sovereignty to eastern Europe.